

Uniform Statistical Reporting System

**The 1999 Client Baseline Study**



**Study Description**

**And**

**Questionnaires**

Statewide Office of Family Court Services  
Judicial Council of California  
Administrative Office of the Courts

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## **Study Description**

### **The 1999 Client Baseline Study**

This study is part of a program of research sponsored by the Center for Families, Children & the Courts entitled the Statewide Uniform Statistical Reporting System (SUSRS), fulfilling a legislative mandate for statewide statistics that advise family law policy. SUSRS provides rigorous statistics on issues facing policymakers, judges, attorneys, court personnel, researchers, special-interest groups, and parents who use the family courts.

#### **Objectives:**

The 1999 Client Baseline Study<sup>1</sup> (informally known as the 1999 Snapshot Study) is a representative cross section of parents using family court services across the state. Like its 1991, 1993, and 1996 predecessors, this baseline study offers reliable statistics about the utility of family court services and documents the prevailing experiences of clients in court-based resolution of disputes about child custody and visitation. The 1999 study was designed to continue to chart trends and changes since 1991, and to address questions raised in light of continually rising caseloads, changes in demographics of family court users, and changes in law and court procedures.

Mediation of child-custody and visitation issues is the service provided most often by family court services; however, the various courts offer a wide range of family court services, meeting diverse needs throughout the state. In addition to child-custody mediation, the 1999 Client Baseline Study collected data about partial child-custody evaluations and investigations,<sup>2</sup> full child-custody evaluations and investigations, and guardianships. Premarital counseling, stepparent adoption, dependency mediation, counseling on other family matters, and other family court services were counted, but no other information was gathered about those services.

The baseline studies collect information about all California clients using the covered family court services listed above within the designated time period of the research. The 1999 study gathered information for a two-week period from September 27 through October 8, 1999.

#### **Procedures:**

The SUSRS system follows a collaborative research model. Research questions for this study were identified in consultation with policy leaders, service providers, and family court personnel across the state. Data collection methods that facilitated client participation on a confidential basis were developed in site visits and consultation with individual court mediation service

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<sup>1</sup>A full description of the content, design, and methodology of the study is provided in *The 1999 Client Baseline Study: Data Collection Methods* (2000), Center for Families, Children & the Courts, Administrative Office of the Courts, San Francisco.

<sup>2</sup>This label covered a variety of fairly new services offered in many family courts. These include emergency screenings, ex parte screenings, brief assessments, fast-track evaluations, ASAP screenings, mini-evaluations, expedited investigations. The term was meant to distinguish these services from the more traditional full child-custody investigation and evaluation.

providers. Primary responsibility for the scientific merit, administration, and analysis of the findings rests with the Statewide Office.

Instruments in the 1999 Client Baseline Study were customized for particular types of services:

For *child custody mediation sessions*, three questionnaires were administered:

- The *Client Profile* was completed by each parent before the session. This questionnaire covered the family's current situation, issues each person was bringing to the session, and parent and child demographics.
- Immediately after the custody mediation session, each parent was asked to complete a *Parent Viewpoint*, a survey of the client's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the counselor, the process, and the outcome.
- The *Counselor Report*, which described the process and outcome of the session, was completed by the counselor after each session.

For *partial evaluation/investigations*, *Client Profile—P.E.* and a *Partial Evaluation/Investigation Report* which included many of the questions on the mediation *Counselor Report* were used and the same research procedures were followed. Anticipating that there could be a substantial number of partial evaluations where the parents were not in the office during the study period, demographic questions from the *Profile* were added to the *Partial Evaluation Report* for the counselor to provide.

For *full investigations and evaluations*, no client forms were used since, unlike the previously named services, clients were not likely to be in the family court services' offices on the day when the counselors filled out their questionnaires. For each investigation and evaluation completed in the two-week study period, the counselor was asked to fill out an *Evaluation and Investigation Report* describing the process, outcomes, and recommendations, and providing some information about the family. A case was considered completed when the counselor submitted the report. The report's completion during the two-week study period was used as the criterion for including the case in the study because only at that point could the counselor provide the full summary information about the case.

For *guardianship investigations* completed in the two-week study period, the counselor filled out a *Counselor Report—Guardianship* describing the case, process, outcomes, and recommendations. As in the comprehensive investigations and evaluations, and for the same reasons, a case was considered completed when the counselor submitted the report. No client forms were used because guardianship clients were not likely to be in the offices on the same day the report was completed.

The client questionnaires were available in both English and Spanish.

All direct providers of family court services across the state filled out brief questionnaires, *Service Provider Registration Form*, indicating their gender, ethnicity, credentials, experience, years of service, and perception of changes in family courts during their tenures.

Family Court Services directors or coordinators in each superior court completed two different questionnaires. A *Directors' Questionnaire*, was completed before the Snapshot Study providing an inventory of services offered and information about their service model and practices. The information was used in planning the statewide data collection. The second questionnaire, *Directors' Follow-up Questionnaire*, reported the number of services actually provided within the data collection period and further information about the practices of each court. The count of services made it possible to calculate the percentage of cases for which research data was provided.

The 1999 Client Baseline Study gathered information about 2,812 court-based child-custody and visitation mediation sessions, 80 percent of the 3,517 mediation sessions which took place during the study period.

***Use of the Findings:***

These findings can provide an important resource for those who care about the best interests of children including the courts, legislators, attorneys, counselors, and parents. This survey's results will become part of the SUSRS database. SUSRS results have been incorporated into parent education programs, mediator training's and workshops, and judicial education. The data have also contributed to legislative hearings and have been included in testimony to state and federal commissions. Results have appeared in the media and have been presented to professional conferences in California, nationally and internationally.